Raga Alap (fragment)

Sound wakes first, rising
from the trees in a thousand
small throats.

One note, thin as a wire of
breath.
Then a second, lower and
rougher.
Then a burst of replies—
not scattered,
but swelling outward,
spreading through the dark
like water moving under ice.

Soon the whole canopy is
alive with it:
shimmering, shaking,
voices tumbling over each
other in quick silvered
threads.
Sharp upward whistles,
round mellow calls,
dry clicking phrases,
slow descending tones that
fall away into nothing.

The air tightens with
vibration.

Branches tremble as if
remembering old storms.
Leaves quiver in small, tense
patterns—
caught between darkness
and its undoing.

More voices enter.
Bright and piercing,
throaty and cracked,
tiny rhythmic pulses
repeating like coded signals.
Some calls sound close
enough to graze the ear.
Others echo from distances

hidden in the thick pre-dawn
haze.

The sound lifts.

It rises through the branches,
spills across rooftops,
sweeps over the river in
broad strokes.
Mist shivers under the
pressure—
ribbons breaking, joining,
breaking again
as birds skim low, wings
brushing the cold surface

and sending rings racing
outward
before the light even
considers arriving.

A larger shape bursts upward,
sets off a chain of motion—
smaller birds leap from its
wake,
two more answer,
a cluster takes flight in a
single rolling wave.

For a moment,
the trees feel almost

weightless,
emptied and filled at once
by this ungoverned orchestra.

The sound peaks—
not in volume,
but in density,
a layered chorus thick enough
that the air itself seems to
pulse.

Only when the noise reaches
its own saturation
does the horizon begin to
change.

First a faint pale tint.
Then a widening band of colour.
The mist turns soft amber.
The river accepts the light in trembling patches.

But the birds keep singing,
as if the sun’s arrival were merely another cue in a performance older than memory,
an instinct older than the city beneath them,

older than any human claim
to music.

Wings begin to settle.
Not gently—
with leftover tremor,
as though their bodies still
echo the sound inside them.
A few calls linger,
hanging in the growing light
like notes that refuse to
resolve.

The day gathers beneath
them.

Ferns release their curls.
Grass catches fire in thin
streaks of gold.
Moisture rises from the earth,
turning to small sparks in the
sun.
A dog stretches from sleep
into wakefulness,
its ribs lifting and falling with
a slow yawn.
Goats shift near the ghats.
A cat drops from a wall with a
soft thud,
tail twitching at the heat's

approach.

The birds, having opened the
doors of the morning,
fall quiet
in a way that feels deliberate,
as though making room.

And into that space—
without fanfare,
without claim—
the first human sounds begin.

A metal cup knocked against
stone.

A door eased open.
Water pouring in uneven
rhythm.
Soft footsteps through a
courtyard half in shadow.

Smells rise in thin threads—
warming oil,
fresh charcoal,
the last fragrance of night-
flattened flowers.
Cloth flutters above a
courtyard,
testing the weight of sunlight
on its edges.

A cart groans into motion.
A man splashes his face,
ties his cloth tight,
steps into the heat building
around him.
A sack drags across earth,
dust rising then falling
instantly.

A conch-shell tone curves
outward from a dark hallway,
steady and unbroken,
meeting the morning where it
already breathes.

Wood cracks.
Fabric snaps.
A dog speaks once to the street.

Near the river, nets are pulled from the water,
threads of silver falling through fingers.
Steel pots knock softly together.
Sweetness floats from warming jaggery.

Rails catch light.

A bell releases a single clear
note.
Dust shifts aside.

Children murmur awake.
Laundry strikes stone.
A vendor shapes his call in his
throat.

And behind shutters still
untouched by light,
a hand touches strings.

A vibration escapes—
small,

warm,
certain.

Another follows,
longer,
quieter,
as if listening to the morning
it enters.

Birds return to their branches.
The river brightens.
The streets begin to collect
their day.

The vibration waits,

resting inside the vast music
that no human will ever truly
match.

Heat gathers in the lanes,
loosening the last threads of
shadow.
The sounds shift — not
louder, just denser.

A woman folds her shawl
over one shoulder and steps
into the street,
the pot on her hip knocking
softly against her ribs.

Across the lane a boy wipes
down a wooden bench
outside his father’s stall,
leaving streaks of water that
evaporate almost as soon as
he makes them.

Two men argue under their
breath near a stack of grain
sacks.
Not anger — habit.
Their gestures small,
practiced, almost rhythmic.

“...told him yesterday.”

“And he heard?”
“That one? He hears only rupees.”
A grunt.
A shrug.
One of them slaps a mosquito off his arm without missing a syllable.

Up above, on a balcony that catches the first hard light,
an old woman shakes crumbs off a cloth,
watching the lane with eyes that see everything without

interest.
A parrot in a bamboo cage
mutters something in a
human cadence
it learned years ago and
refuses to forget.

A group of women pass by
with baskets of laundry
balanced on hips,
cloth bundles pressing into
their sides.
Their bangles touch in soft
quick clicks
as they shift the weight in

unison without speaking.
At the end of the line a
younger woman trails behind,
her eyes lowered but alert,
glancing at something across
the street
before she hides the glance
inside her steps.

A broom scrapes stone.
A metal bowl rings once and
is silenced.
A child cries, stops, waits,
then lets out a half-hearted
protest

that dissolves as soon as
someone lifts him.

From a corner stall, oil spits
in a shallow pan.
A man dips pieces of
flattened dough into it,
his movements fast but not
hurried.
A customer stands waiting,
turning a coin over in his
palm,
flipping it, catching it,
flipping it again.

A small crowd forms around a
black-painted notice-board
where a new sheet of paper
has been pasted over the old
one.
No one reads the words in full.
They lean in,
squint,
mutter fragments of phrases
to each other,
some satisfied,
some distrustful,
some already tired of
whatever is written there.

Farther down the street,
a police whistle cuts through
the noise —
one short burst.
Not a warning,
just a reminder:
someone in uniform is awake.

The crowd shifts by instinct.

A student, clutching books
too tightly under one arm,
pauses just long enough to
listen
before weaving into the flow

of bodies
heading toward the river's
edge.

A rickshaw-puller pulls his
cloth tighter around his waist,
his cough catching on the
morning air.
He places one foot on the
cart's wooden beam,
leans forward,
and begins his slow ascent
through the lane,
each step syncing with the
rise of heat.

Near a doorway,
a girl crouches beside a
wrapped object
longer than her forearm.
She touches the cloth once
with two fingers,
as if checking that it is still
there,
still hers,
still allowed.
When footsteps approach,
she stands quickly,
lifts the bundle under her
arm,

and slips inside without looking back.

Bits of conversation dust the air like husks:

“...mill opens late again...”
“...prices—don’t ask...”
“...he said he saw them last night...”
“...no, not our neighborhood...”
“...they’ll come this way soon enough...”

None of it resolves into a full thought.
It doesn't need to.

On a high floor, behind
shutters half-opened,
the faint vibration returns —
a string touched,
drawn just enough to speak,
then allowed to fall silent.
A second note follows,
longer, warmer,
shaping itself inside the
growing noise of the street.

No face tied to it.
No name.
Just the sound,
as if the morning itself is
being tuned from somewhere
inside its own walls.

The city inhales.
Heat rises.
Dust lifts.
People move with the
certainty of those who have
lived this pattern every day of
their lives.

And under all of it —
subtle, wandering,
barely louder than breath —
the vibration continues,
threading through the noise
like a line waiting to become
music.

Heat thickens along the
rooftops,
pressing down just enough to
make the dust hesitate
before rising.
The lane takes its shape:
voices layered,

footsteps weaving,
objects scraping stone in
rhythms no one intends.

A tea boy lifts a brass kettle
from the stove,
steam curling against his
wrist.
He winces, adjusts his grip,
and begins pouring into
chipped glasses lined in a
shaky row.
A customer blows on his tea,
the breath briefly visible in
the rising heat.

Someone behind him mutters,
“You drink too early,”
and receives no reply.

A bicycle wobbles through
the lane,
its bell tapped twice —
not to warn,
but to announce the rider’s
mood.
A cloth bag swings from the
handlebar,
filled with vegetables still
damp from the morning
market.

As he passes, the cyclist
whistles a three-note phrase
slightly off-key,
but persistent.

A man rolls up the shutters of
his shop,
the iron plates rattling
upward like an impatient
percussion.
Inside, he sweeps a trail
through the dust,
the broom catching on the
floor's uneven stones.
His son leans in the doorway,

arms crossed,
eyes half-open.
“Don’t start the day like that,”
the father says without
looking.
The boy doesn’t unfold his
arms.

A woman kneels by a basin,
beating laundry against a
stone slab.
Cloth hits rock with steady
force,
creating a rhythm that others
unconsciously match:

a pot set down here,
a latch clicked there,
the city tuning itself through
repetition.

On a distant wall,
a poster curls at the edges—
a face printed in sharp black
lines,
eyes too large for the paper.
Someone has drawn a quick
slash across the mouth.
Another poster is pasted over
it, wet glue bleeding around
the edges.

Two boys stop to inspect it,
one squinting,
the other tracing a finger
along the drying paste.
They say nothing,
but carry the image with
them as they run off.

Near the river approach,
a group of men load sacks
onto a wooden cart.
One of them counts under his
breath, never loud enough for
anyone to hear the number.
Another wipes sweat from his

neck even though the day hasn't fully risen into heat. A third breaks into a sudden laugh at something unspoken, and the sound cracks through the lane like a burst of percussion before dissolving just as quickly.

Shadows shift under a narrow awning as an older man adjusts his harmonium, pressing a single key to test the air. The note escapes in a thin line, barely a suggestion.

He closes the lid again,
not yet convinced the day is
ready.

Across from him, a girl leans
against a doorway, her hair
still damp, eyes following the
movements around her
with a quietness that isn't
shyness.
She holds a small wrapped
object close to her chest,
her fingers tightening around
it each time a passerby
comes too near.

When the lane crowds suddenly, she steps back into the shadow, letting it hide her shape without swallowing her.

Stray dogs wander in loose circles, sniffing at discarded wrappers, settling beside the spots where heat gathers most quickly.
One curls near a clay pot of water, lapping once, twice, then resting its head on its paws as if listening to

something beneath the noise.

A tram scrapes along the
main road beyond the lane,
its metal groan sliding
through the air,
followed by the bell's bright
punctuation.
The sound reaches the lane
indirectly, bending around
walls, softened by distance
but unmistakable.
Bits of overheard life drift
past like dust motes:

“...he didn’t come home last night...”
“...if the inspector sees that...”
“...prices climb like thieves...”
“...not our matter, leave it...”
“...they say there’ll be a meeting...”

Some of the words stick;
most evaporate before they settle.

And once again, faintly,
as if answering a question no one has asked aloud,

the vibration returns from
behind the shuttered room:
a single stretched note,
hesitant, then another
drawn with more certainty.

It threads through the lane
so quietly it might be
mistaken for the world
adjusting its breath.

People don’t turn toward it,
but something in their
rhythm shifts—
steps slowing,

a gesture paused,
a breath held a second longer.

The day rises around them,
not fast,
not slow—
just inevitable,
a gathering of heat, sound,
and bodies
moving toward the shape
that will hold them.

And beneath it all,
the unclaimed vibration,
patient,

waiting for its moment
to step from the room into
the city’s raga.

A line forms outside a small
provisions shop where a
hand-cranked gramophone
sits on a shelf, its brass horn
bent like a wilting flower.
The owner winds it once,
twice, testing the resistance
of the spring.
A crackle of static whispers
from within the horn,
then a faint vocal line,

thin as smoke,
almost swallowed by the
street.

The people in line don't turn
toward it.
They keep their eyes on the
weighing scale,
trusting nothing but the
angle of the metal pans.

A man near the back mutters,
"Short measure again."
Another replies, "Always on a
Tuesday."

Their voices barely rise above
breath.
A truth that doesn’t need
witnesses.

At the corner, a telegraph boy
hurries past,
messages strapped to his
chest in a worn leather pouch.
The faint metallic clicking
from the office behind him
drifts into the lane —
fast, nervous, like an
impatient heartbeat hidden
inside the walls.

A small pile of coal sits by the
curb, pieces glinting with
early heat.
A barefoot boy reaches for
one, only to pull his hand back
when someone behind him
mutters,
“Leave it.”

Above them, on a balcony
rinsed in sun,
a school uniform hangs stiff.
Inside, a child recites
multiplication tables,

each number falling into the
next like beads sliding across
twine.

Two men carrying long
bamboo poles pass through,
talking about the mill:
someone collapsed,
someone didn’t return,
someone argued with the
foreman and was made to
regret it.
Their steps fall in sync with
their words
until the conversation twists

and the rhythm breaks.

At the street pump,
water arcs in uneven bursts.
A woman leans her full
weight into the handle,
her bangles slipping down
her arm in soft metallic
accents.
A queue forms behind her.
Someone complains.
Someone else answers
sharply.
The dispute dies in the air,
unfinished, unimportant.

A kite circles above the lane,
riding the early heat in wide,
thoughtful sweeps.
Its cry drops once through
the air —
low, coarse, decisive —
and something inside the
street pauses
without knowing why.

A man sits cross-legged near
a doorway,
sorting torn fabric into three
piles:

the mendable,
the saleable,
the hopeless.
His needle passes through
the blue cloth
in motions so practiced
they seem detached from
thought.

A child draws a chalk circle on
stone,
then dots around the rim.
Two others hover,
rehearsing arguments before
they begin.

The game collapses the
moment it starts,
chalk smearing under
impatient feet
until a woman scatters them
with a single sharp gesture.

A horse-drawn carriage clips
the lane's edge,
its wheels catching stones,
its harness ringing with small,
irregular metal taps.
The driver curses softly at
something ahead
no one else can see.

A goat noses into a basket of vegetables;
the vendor flicks a cloth at it without breaking his conversation:
“No, he won’t come today.”
“And if he does?”
“We’ll hear before he reaches the bridge.”
The goat tries again,
more confidently,
and earns a carrot stub for persistence.

At the far end of the lane,
where the sun pools heaviest,
two workers lift a crate onto
a handcart.
One misjudges,
grunting as the weight shifts
and slams down.
The other laughs,
a brief clean sound that cuts
through the thickening heat
before dissolving into the
dusty air.

And from behind the same
shuttered window,

still sealed against the
morning,
a note unfurls.

A single tone.
Stretched.
Searching.
Its tail disappearing into the
hum of the street.

Another follows.
Lower,
longer,
a sound feeling its way
forward

as though testing the city's
temperature.

No eyes turn.
No feet stop.
But a woman at the pump
pauses her breath.
A child's hand freezes mid-
gesture.
The rickshaw-puller
straightens his spine
as though listening without
meaning to.

The lane absorbs the notes,

lets them settle into its ribs,
treats them as part of its
oldest truth.

Heat climbs.
Shadows compress.
The morning thickens into its
own weight,
steady and inevitable.

And beneath all of it,
quiet but awakening,
the vibration grows —
no louder than before,
just more certain of its right

to exist.

A hush moves through the lane,
not silence—just a thinning of noise,
as if the morning holds its breath for a heartbeat
before resuming its shape.

A man carrying folded newspapers enters the street,
the pages under his arm still warm from the press.
Ink stains his fingertips a dull

indigo.
He doesn’t shout headlines;
he murmurs them to himself,
as if tasting each phrase
before deciding
whether the world deserves
to hear it.

A woman buys one,
not for the news,
but for the clean sheet she’ll
use to wrap vegetables later.
She glances at the top line
anyway,
eyes tightening,

but she folds the paper
before finishing the sentence.

A colonial police constable
walks past,
helmet at a slight angle,
baton tapping his thigh in a
slow, steady beat.
People move aside without
looking directly at him—
not fear,
just an instinct the body has
learned.
The constable doesn't
acknowledge anyone.

He scans the lane,
pauses at the sight of the
new poster on the wall,
then moves on without a
word.

The poster’s edges lift in the
heat.
A few faces glance at it—
then glance away.
A name on it means trouble.
A date on it means gathering.
A place on it means watching.

Two young men in loose

shirts approach the wall,
one carrying a small pot of
wheat paste.
They don't talk.
One kneels,
the other presses a new
sheet over the old,
smoothing it with quick,
practiced strokes.
A third poster goes up beside
it.
Red letters.
Too bold for comfort.

Someone across the lane

mutters,
“Do it at night, fools.”
Someone else says,
“They do.”
A pause.
“This is just the overflow.”

The gramophone inside the
shop sputters,
needle scratching air,
then sputters again—
the record warped by heat.
The owner stops cranking,
lets the machine die,
and wipes sweat from his

brow with the end of his shirt.

A group of mill workers
passes through,
shirts hung over their
shoulders,
faces drawn in the same tired
angle.
Their footsteps carry a faint
syncopation—
something like determination
sharpened into rhythm.
One coughs.
Another spits.
A third says,

“Tomorrow they’ll call it a meeting.”
Someone answers,
“They already did.”
The line keeps moving.

Near the pump,
a woman wrings water from a cloth,
her wrists twisting with quiet force.
She listens to the workers,
not openly,
but with a stillness that is attention.

A child tugs her sari.
She pulls him close without
breaking her focus.

From a distant street,
a loud hollow drumbeat rolls
in—
not festival rhythm,
not celebration—
just a single repetitive call,
meant to summon,
meant to announce,
meant to signal something
beginning elsewhere.

Heads lift.
Not many.
Just enough to notice.

A fruit seller arranges his baskets,
mangoes stacked like small suns.
He taps one with his thumb,
listening for ripeness
the way others listen for
intent in a stranger's voice.
A customer asks,
"Good today?"
The seller shrugs.

“Good enough.”

On a rooftop,
a woman hangs wet cloth on
a line.
The fabric slaps with each
movement,
echoing down the lane.
She stops halfway,
hand paused mid-air,
listening.

From the shuttered room,
another sequence of notes
emerges -

longer now,
more certain,
a pattern forming.
Not melody.
Not yet.
Just exploration,
like a hand moving through a dark room
without fear of what it might touch.

A rickshaw-puller hears it,
pauses his step,
touches his chest lightly,
as if the sound were brushing

through his ribs.

The constable returns.
He looks toward the
shuttered room,
expression unreadable.
Then he moves on.

The heat climbs another
degree.
A crow lands on the edge of a
roof
and delivers a harsh call that
cuts the air clean.
Someone swears at it.

Someone else laughs.

Dust rises,
settles,
rises again.

The lane gathers itself
as if preparing for something
it already knows is coming
but refuses to name.

And in the thickening air,
the vibration from behind the
shutters grows steadier-
not louder,

just more rooted,
as though answering the city
before the city knows it
asked anything.

Heat settles into the stones,
warming them from the
inside,
as if the lane itself is
beginning to breathe faster.

A handcart rattles into view,
stacked high with burlap
sacks tied in uncertain knots.
The man pulling it leans

forward with his whole body,
feet planting hard against the
uneven ground.
The wheels complain with
every rotation.
A passing shopkeeper says,
“Too much weight.”
The puller answers without
looking up:
“Not enough choice.”

Behind him, a pair of
schoolboys walk in slow
reluctant steps,
their satchels swinging in

opposite rhythms.
One recites a poem under his
breath, stumbling over a line
he should know by heart.
The other kicks at a pebble,
missing it twice before
making contact.
They don't speak to each
other, but their shadows fuse
whenever the sun narrows
the space between them.

A cluster of men crouch near
a shuttered storefront,
sharing a single beedi.

They pass it carefully
between fingers,
as if it were fragile,
or expensive,
or both.
One of them murmurs,
“Meeting at eight.”
Another says,
“Here?”
A third answers,
“No. Across the bridge.”
Their voices stay low.
Their eyes stay busier than
their mouths.

An elderly man walks past
with a tin lunchbox,
the metal dented in three
places.
His steps are small,
but exact,
as if he's measuring the
ground for someone who will
walk after him.

A group of women gather
near the pump,
their saris bright in the
hardening light.
One begins scrubbing a brass

pot with a briskness that
borders on irritation.
Another leans close and
whispers something that
makes her pause mid-scrub.
They exchange a look—
sharp, fleeting, loaded.
Then the scrubbing resumes,
harder than before.

Further up the lane,
a printing-press apprentice
hangs fresh sheets of inked
paper on a rope to dry.
The letters gleam painfully

black in the sun—
announcements, names,
demands, questions.
The apprentice stands back,
arms crossed,
jaw tight.
A gust of wind lifts the
sheets in a single ripple,
and for a moment they look
like flags.

A tram on the main road
releases a long metal groan
that bends as it turns the
corner.

The sound arrives in the lane
as distortion—
half-warning, half-cry—
before fading into the midday
murmur.

Two children chase each
other past the crate-stack,
bare feet slapping dust into
the air.
Their laughter runs high and
wild,
cutting through the tension
that has begun to gather like
humidity.

A man shouts for them to
watch the crates.
They ignore him.
He pretends not to mind.

From a rooftop,
a woman pours lentils into a
metal tray,
shaking it gently until the
stones separate from the
grain.
The clicking sound echoes
along the lane in small,
irregular beats—
a rhythm with no name

but familiar to everyone.

Near the corner,
a tonga horse stamps its hoof,
tail flicking irritably at flies.
The driver strokes its neck,
muttering,
“Easy, friend. Long day yet.”
The horse snorts once,
a sound that seems almost
like agreement.

And then—
the vibration again.

Not shy now.
Not tentative.
The pattern stretches:
a rising phrase,
a gliding descent,
a pause,
as if feeling the lane's pulse
before choosing the next
note.

A boy carrying a basket stops
mid-step,
the basket dipping against
his hip.
A woman washing clothes

tilts her head,
ear turned toward the
shuttered room
before she checks herself and
continues.
The constable walking past
slows by a fraction,
his boots crunching softer on
the grit.

The note shifts,
warmer,
rounder,
balancing itself in the air
as if carving out a small

clearing inside the noise.

A man pushing a cart of clay
pots mutters,
“That sound again.”
His companion shrugs,
“Someone practices.”
But his eyes flick toward the
shuttered window,
not curious—
uneasy.

The political posters flutter in
the rising heat.
The workers’ footsteps

tighten.
The women's voices lower.
The children's energy
sharpens.
The goats wander closer to
shade.

The lane fills,
pressing into itself like a
drumhead warming under the
first real strike.

Something is forming—
not a story,
not yet—

just the shape of tension,
quiet but accumulating,
like a shadow waiting for its body.

And under all of it,
the sitar's hidden vibration
holds steady,
no longer testing the morning
—
now entering it.

The lane brightens with a heat that feels older than the day, as if it's been waiting

since before sunrise to take
its full shape.

A bullock cart creaks into
view, the animal moving with
the slow certainty of
something that cannot be
hurried.
Its horns are wrapped with
faded red cloth,
frayed in places,
as though the blessings tied
there have weathered too
many seasons.
The driver flicks the reins

lightly,
not to command,
but to remind.

Behind the cart,
a group of clerks in half-
buttoned shirts walks in a
thin disciplined line,
faces set toward the offices
that will soon swallow them.
One tucks papers under his
arm;
another adjusts his
spectacles;
a third slaps dust from his

sandals with a kind of weary defiance.
Their silence is not solemn—
it's practiced.

A man sits on the steps of a shuttered shop,
reading a folded pamphlet
as though it might crumble if handled too quickly.
A few words stand out on the page—
bold, urgent shapes.
He folds it again when he sees the constable pass,

slips it into his waistband,
and pretends to massage his
knee.

Near the pump,
a young boy tries to fill a clay
pot too heavy for him.
He braces it with both arms,
arms too thin for the task.
Water spills onto the dust,
darkening it in a widening
circle.
A woman nearby tells him,
“Don’t waste,”
without looking up from her

washing.
He nods,
fighting the pot,
fighting the day.

A printing-press worker
hurries through the lane,
hands stained with ink up to
the knuckles.
Sheets of drying paper stick
out from his satchel,
edges still tacky.
He glances at the posters on
the walls,
checking which ones remain,

which ones have been torn,
which ones he'll have to
replace after sundown.

At the far end,
a man rolls cigarettes on a
wooden board,
his fingers moving with the
neat speed of someone who's
done this for twenty years.
He lines them up like soldiers,
each the same length,
each packed with identical
care.
A passerby asks for one.

The man nods,
hands it over,
says nothing.
The lane speaks enough for
both of them.

The mill siren sounds in the
distance—
low, metallic,
heavy with the promise of
hours already spent before
they begin.
Heads lift toward it.
Bodies adjust.
The siren doesn't call workers;

it counts them.

Two young men lean in the
shade near a shuttered
warehouse,
talking about something
neither wants overheard.
Their sentences are
fragments,
half-sealed:
“...tonight...”
“...only if he agrees...”
“...don’t trust him...”
“...no one will see...”
They fall quiet whenever

footsteps approach.
Then resume,
voices pitched too low for
meaning,
but full enough for intent.

A dog trots through the lane
carrying a piece of paper in
its mouth—
a scrap from a torn poster.
Someone laughs.
Someone else says,
“That’s luck.”
Someone else replies,
“Or warning.”

The dog drops the paper,
sniffs it,
moves on without interest.

The gramophone crackles
once inside the shop,
not music—just the sound of
the spring settling.
The owner wipes sweat from
his forehead
and lowers the lid.

And then—
from behind the shuttered
room—

the vibration again.

But now it carries shape.
Not melody,
not fully,
but a suggestion:
a rising interval,
a held pause,
a descending line that seems
to fold the morning around it.

People don’t stop,
but subtle shifts ripple
through the lane:
a slowed step,

a turned ear,
a breath held long enough to
be noticed.

Even the bullock lifts its head.
Even the clerks blink.
Even the posters seem to
settle more firmly onto the
walls.

The sound ends without
resolution,
leaving a thin emptiness in its
wake—
the kind that only grows

when silence replaces
something that wants to
continue.

The lane exhales.
Heat presses down harder.
Movements sharpen.
Voices lower.

The day has reached the edge
of something,
though no one says what.
The city hasn't named its
tension yet,
but it's already shaped like a

pulse.

And inside that pulse,
quiet,
determined,
waiting,
the sitar’s hidden voice
prepares itself
for the first true note.

Mid-morning heat presses
down in a slow, decisive way,
the kind that doesn’t rise
suddenly, but settles into
everything like a thought that

won’t be dismissed.

The tram on the main road
arrives with a clatter that
carries into the lane—
a blunt percussion of metal
shaking on metal.
Bodies push toward it from
every direction,
hands gripping railings,
elbows sharpening,
eyes fixed ahead,
each person convinced the
day will not forgive lateness.

A man in a white cotton shirt
tries to board,
but someone else pulls ahead
of him.
He mutters something about
manners;
the other man mutters
something about survival.
Their irritation sticks to the
air, but the tram's conductor
rings the bell twice,
and the argument is
swallowed whole
as the tram groans forward.

Two women carrying baskets
of vegetables hurry past,
anklets chiming in uneven
rhythm.
Their pace is quick,
but their voices keep low—
just enough to pass warnings
between them:
“...don’t go through the
southern lane today...”
“...they said soldiers came...”
“...not soldiers—police...”
“...same difference...”

A third woman overhears,

her hand tightening on the basket handle
even though she forces her face to remain flat, unreadable.

A clerk hurries by carrying a stack of papers tied with twine.
The papers shift under his arm;
one slips free and skids across the ground.
He lunges to catch it,
but a gust of wind lifts it just

beyond reach.
A child catches it instead,
reads a few lines aloud—
words about quotas and
demands and signatures—
before handing it back with
solemn care.
The clerk gives the child an
unplanned gratitude
and disappears into the
crowd.

Near a spice shop,
a man grinds chili in a stone
mortar,

his movements tightening
with the heat.
Red dust lifts into the air,
stinging eyes,
catching throats,
pushing people slightly off
their paths.
A vendor waves the dust
away irritably,
saying,
“You’ll blind half the street.”
The grinder answers,
“Better blind than hungry.”
Both statements are true.

Against a cracked wall,
two boys draw rough shapes
with charcoal—
circles, triangles,
then a face.
Not a child’s face.
A public one.
The boys argue about the
eyes
until a passing shopkeeper
wipes the drawing away with
his cloth
so quickly
it seems the wall itself erased
it.

A postal runner jogs through,
brown bag bouncing against
his hip.
He carries no letters visible to
the eye—
but the urgency of his stride
signals a message someone
somewhere needs to receive
before the day tilts too far.

From deeper in the city,
a faint chant begins—
not loud,
not unified,

just repeated lines rising in
pockets of sound.
The words don’t carry clearly,
but the rhythm does—
steady,
growing,
intentional.

People look up for half a
second,
then look away.
Not denial—
habit.

The bullock cart moves again,

its slow creak now competing
with the city’s expanding
beat.
The bullock stops at the edge
of the lane,
stamping once,
sending dust into the air.
The driver pats its flank,
saying nothing,
but the gesture reads like
reassurance meant as much
for himself as for the animal.

A small group of men gathers
outside a shuttered office,

glancing at their pocket
watches
with a tension that has
nothing to do with time.
A guard stands nearby,
rifle slung casually at his
shoulder,
but his eyes track every
movement around him.

A newspaper vendor shouts
headlines he barely believes,
his voice cracking over
unfamiliar words.
Passersby buy papers without

discussing them,
hands folding news into
silence.

And then —
from the shuttered room —
the vibration again.

But this time, it doesn't
explore.
It states.

A fuller note.
Sustained.
Deep enough to thrum

against the wooden frames
of nearby windows.
Calm enough to feel like
contradiction
against the rising unease of
the street.

For a heartbeat,
the lane aligns around it—
the workers' murmurs,
the clerks' hurried steps,
the vegetable sellers' hands,
the children's restless energy
—
everything settles into a

single, accidental rhythm
the moment the note lands.

Then the sound releases,
and the world resumes its
fracture.

The constable from earlier
appears again.
He stops near one of the
posters.
Reads.
Re-reads.
He scratches his cheek with
the baton’s tip.

Then he tears the poster
down,
folds it into a small, neat
square,
and tucks it into his pocket.

People don't stare.
But they feel it.
The way heat announces
itself through the back of the
neck.

The note from inside the
shuttered room lingers in
memory,

a thin echo beneath the
thickening day.
Not defiant.
Not afraid.
Just present.

The kind of presence
the city will eventually have
to answer.

Heat gathers like intent now,
holding itself low to the
ground, thickening the air
until every movement seems
carved rather than made.

A cluster of schoolgirls walks
together near the edge of the
lane, their braids swinging in
counterpoint.
One holds a slate pressed to
her chest.
Another whispers something
that makes the others cover
their mouths, laughter held
back as if laughter itself
might draw the wrong kind of
attention.
Their teacher follows behind,
face stern,

eyes soft,
a presence equal parts shield
and burden.

An older man carries a stack
of clay cups on a wooden tray,
each cup fragile,
each destined to be broken
by evening.
He moves with careful
precision,
one wrong angle away from
losing half his day's income.
A child bumps into him,
cups rattling like nervous

teeth.
The man steadies the tray,
breath sharp,
but says nothing.
The child's mother drags the
child away,
her apology more gesture
than word.

Near a chai stall,
two men gesture heatedly
over a sheet of newsprint—
voices low,
fingers tracing lines of text,
argument circling some point

neither will concede.

“...doesn’t matter what they wrote—”
“It matters because they wrote it.”
“Paper lies.”
“So does silence.”

Their debate breaks when a bicycle brushes past,
bell ringing twice,
the rider calling out,
“Move, brothers!”
The moment fractures into

laughter,
then dissolves.

From the direction of the
river,
a group of fishermen returns,
nets thrown over their
shoulders in long, tired arcs.
Their feet leave soft marks in
the dust.
They speak in short phrases,
not to each other
but toward some thought
they share without needing
to say it.

A boy tries to follow them,
bare feet slapping the ground,
until one of the fishermen
turns and says,
“School first.”
The boy stops,
face tight with
disappointment,
but obeys.

At the far corner,
a line of bullocks passes
slowly, yokes creaking,
drivers clicking their tongues

in gentle command.
The animals move with the
patient certainty of beings
that do not fear days
repeating themselves.

The colonial constable
returns once more,
this time accompanied by
another, younger,
less practiced in pretending
not to watch.
They walk with synchronized
indifference, a performance
learned rather than felt.

Their boots strike stone in
flat, unyielding beats.

A man carrying a basket of
flowers steps aside quickly,
then mutters under his
breath,
not quite softly enough.
One of the constables
glances back,
but the man is already gone,
disappeared into the crowd.

Atop a roof,
a woman spreads lentils on a

woven mat,
sifting them with her hands.
The lentils click softly,
falling into place
like tiny beads settling on a
drumskin.
She pauses when she hears
the constables below,
hands still buried in the grain.

A small group gathers at a
stall selling ink and paper.
The buyer tests a fountain
pen twice, shakes it,
makes a thin black line on a

scrap of old ledger paper.
The ink bleeds slightly,
imperfect, but he nods
anyway as if imperfection is
expected from the world.

Then it comes—
from the shuttered room—
the longest vibration yet.

A low note,
drawn out,
calm but filled with weight,
like a thread pulled slowly
through thick cloth.

It doesn’t ask for space.
It creates it.

People don’t stop,
but the entire lane adjusts:
a shoulder relaxes,
a hand slows,
a voice lowers,
a footstep softens.

It’s not recognition.
It’s resonance.

Even the constables feel it—
one pauses,

just long enough to betray
instinct.
The older one clears his
throat,
breaking the moment.

The note lifts,
then falls into a gentle
descent,
not sad,
just knowing.
A phrase follows—
still small,
still private,
but shaped now,

intent forming.

For a few seconds,
the city holds its breath
inside the sound.

Then everything resumes:
the pressing heat,
the vendors calling prices,
the workers adjusting their loads,
the children darting through legs, the animals shifting in their routines, the constables pretending not to listen.

But underneath,
deep as a foundation stone,
the vibration has changed.
It is no longer a faint morning test.
It is the beginning of presence.

A presence that does not announce itself,
but cannot be ignored.

The lane gathers itself once more—

denser,
brighter,
sharper—
as if preparing for something
it does not yet understand
but already feels.

The heat settles into the lane
like a verdict, not harsh, not
forgiving - simply there,
claiming the stones,
the walls, the bodies moving
through it.

Shadows draw tight under

awnings.
The dust quiets underfoot.
Even the animals pause,
ears flicking toward
something that hasn't
happened yet,
but already feels near.

A cloth merchant rolls up his
mat for the last time this
morning, dusting off threads
that refuse to leave his palms.
He watches the lane without
purpose, eyes following
movement, ears following

tone.
When he’s seen enough,
he lowers the shutters
halfway and disappears inside.

A tonga rolls past at an
unhurried pace,
wheels turning with resigned
devotion.
The driver slaps the reins
gently, not out of impatience
but rhythm.
The horse tosses its head,
snorts once, accepts the day.

A group of workers gathers
at the corner,
their bodies forming a loose
circle that pulses with quiet
gravity.
They say little –
just short phrases,
each one heavy enough to tilt
the air around them:

“...not safe...”
“...can’t ignore...”
“...tonight, maybe...”
“...wait for the word...”

No one asks what word.
Everyone knows.

A woman with a brass pot
walks past them,
her steps measured,
her gaze fixed forward.
Her anklets ring once,
twice, then fall silent
as she disappears into the
brightness.

The constables have moved
on. Their absence is louder
than their presence was.

For a brief moment,
the lane feels suspended—
not caught,
not frozen,
just held between breaths.

And then—
from behind the shuttered
room—
the final sound of the
morning:

A single note.
Pure.

Unhurried.
Drawn from silence
as though the world itself
were being called to
attention.

It rises,
lengthens,
settles into the air
with a certainty that does not
need volume.

People feel it
without choosing to:
a cook stirring lentils pauses,

a child lets a pebble fall from
his hand,
a shopkeeper’s fingers still on
the abacus,
a goat turns its head,
a clerk adjusts his papers
more slowly than before.

The note holds.
Holds longer.
Holds just long enough
for the lane to gather around
it like a crowd around an
unannounced performer.

Then it releases,
softly, cleanly,
leaving a space so faint
most would miss it
if they weren't already
listening
without knowing why.

The shutters stay closed.
The window stays dark.
The player remains unseen.

But the city knows the sound.
Knows it belongs.
Knows it will return.

The lane shifts back into
motion—
but something is different:
a quiet readiness,
a pulse beginning to steady,
the first threads of rhythm
sliding into place.

A cycle repair boy drags a
rusted frame into the sun,
flips it over,
spins the wheel once to
diagnose whatever misery
today brings.

He mutters,
“Bent again. Always bent,”
and starts working,
oily fingers moving faster
than his thoughts.

Across from him,
a woman sells puffed rice out
of a tin drum.
She fans away flies with the
lid.
A customer tells her,
“Smaller handful today.”
She snorts.
“Everything is smaller today.”

A tram grinds by on the main road.
The conductor hangs off the side like he’s daring fate.
He rings the bell twice — a warning, a complaint, nobody knows —
and the sound shivers down the lane.

Two college boys walk past arguing in English,
their accents sharp,
their shirts too clean for the

neighborhood.

“...I’m telling you, yesterday’s meeting was full.”
“Full of what?”
“Full of people who finally stopped pretending.”
“People talk plenty. They don’t act.”
“Maybe today they will.”

They turn the corner,
voices fading but their
tension staying behind
like the aftertaste of a strong

spice.

A man selling lime-water
bangs metal cups together,
a cheap advertisement.
“Cold! Fresh! Drink before the
sun eats your bones!”
A rickshaw puller buys one,
drinks it in three gulps,
hands the cup back without
looking up.

The constable — the older
one —
is still in the lane.

He pretends not to watch
anyone.
Which means he’s watching
everyone.

He stops near the chai stall
again.
This time he orders tea.
He sips it too slowly,
like he’s giving people time to
betray themselves.

The chai seller wipes the
counter,
pretends not to mind.

“You’ll burn your tongue
drinking like that.”

The constable ignores him.

Halfway down the lane,
the wall of posters has
become a small congregation
point.
A group of workers reads
them,
but nobody reads aloud.
That’s not how news floats
here.
Meaning ripples by

expression,
by posture,
by who frowns first.

One man taps a line near the bottom.
Another shakes his head.
A third rolls the paper slightly and says,
“If they march today,
the police will come before the drums.”

A woman passing by mutters,
“The police come before

everything.”

Meanwhile, up behind the
shuttered window —
another line of music.

This one is clearer.
Stronger.
No hesitation.
A rising phrase with a curve
sharp enough to make the
lane look up
even if no one actually does.

Two boys carrying a sack

between them both pause
mid-step.
One whispers,
“It’s him.”
The other whispers back,
“Don’t say that. Not here.”

At a grocery stall,
a man weighing lentils stops,
shifts the weights,
starts again,
and still gets the wrong
measure.
He blames the heat.
But he glances at the

shuttered room.

On a balcony,
a girl braiding her hair coils
one lock too tight,
fumbles,
starts over.
She tilts her head as if
listening for something
familiar
but doesn't quite place it.

Down at the chai stall,
the puller says quietly,
"He plays better every day."

The chai seller shrugs.
“He plays safer every day.”

“What do you mean?”

The seller leans in.
“You don’t play like that
unless you’re hiding from
something.”

The constable sets his empty
cup on the counter
with a deliberate click.

The chai seller smiles politely.
Too politely.

The constable wipes his
mouth with the back of his
hand and walks toward the
shuttered building
with a pace that is not slow
and not fast, but full of
intention.

Someone mutters,
“Here it starts.”

Someone else mutters,

“Here it always starts.”

The music behind the
shutters continues —
unbothered,
unhurried,
as if it knows something the
constable doesn’t.

The heat rises.
The lane tightens.
Rhythm thickens.

The constable walks toward

the shuttered room
with a confidence that's half training,
half performance.
People make space for him —
not much,
just enough to show they understand the rules of proximity.

A stray dog follows behind at a respectful distance,
more curious than loyal.

The music doesn't stop.

If anything, it sharpens.
The phrase straightens,
leans forward,
lands down hard on one note
as if the player is marking his
ground
without ever stepping
outside.

The constable reaches the
door.
It's faded blue, peeling at the
bottom.
He taps it with the baton.

Three taps.
Measured.
Official.

The music continues.

A woman carrying a basket
slows her pace,
tilts her head slightly
before remembering to walk
again.

The constable taps harder.

Inside, a short pause.

Not of fear.
Not of compliance.
More like someone adjusting
their grip.

Then a single note answers —
clean, centered,
almost polite.

The constable sets his jaw.

“Open,” he calls.
His voice is firm,
but not as firm as he wants it
to be.

Something in the tone gives
away the part of him
that didn’t expect the sound
to resist.

He waits.

The lane waits with him.
The vendors stop pretending
to shuffle vegetables.
The chai seller sets down a
cup too quietly.
The rickshaw puller shifts his
weight from one foot to the
other.

A boy in school uniform stops tying his shoelace.

The door does not open.

The constable tries again.
“Open. You hear?”

The music stops.

Not abruptly.
Just… chooses to end.
Like a thought reaching its conclusion.

Silence falls —
the kind that isn’t empty
but charged,
held at the edges.

The constable grips the door
handle.
It doesn’t move.
Locked from inside.

He knocks again, harder.
“Who is there?”

From a balcony above,
a woman calls down:

“No one we know.”

It’s a joke.
A bad one.
Too bold for the moment.

The constable looks up,
and the woman quickly steps
back into the shade.

A man at the guava cart
mutters under his breath,
“Idiot.”

The constable hears it,

turns,
scans the faces,
eyes narrowing.

Nobody meets his stare.

He looks back at the door.
Raises the baton.
Not to break it —
just to hit it hard enough
to make the whole street
flinch.

But before he can strike,
the door clicks.

Not wide.
Just a tiny shift—
a permission.
A warning.

Something.

Everyone leans in a fraction.

The constable hesitates
for the first time that
morning.

He reaches for the handle

again.
Pushes.
The door opens by half an inch.
Enough for darkness to spill out.
Not enough to see a person.

He steps closer.

“Who’s inside?” he asks.

Nothing answers.

Then — from somewhere

deep in the room —
a string is plucked.

One note.
Soft.
Pointed.
Direct.

Not aggressive.
Not fearful.

Just precise.

The constable steps back
without meaning to.

A collective exhale moves
through the lane,
quick and small,
like birds startled into
stillness.

The constable schools his
face,
turns to the watching crowd.
“What are you all staring at?”

Nobody responds.

He straightens his uniform,

taps the baton once against
his thigh,
and walks away
as if leaving was his idea.

The door closes quietly.

The lock slips back into place.

And the day continues —
but with a new frequency
running underneath it,
quiet but unmistakable,
as if the lane has heard
something

it can’t unhear.

A boy whispers,
“He made him step back.”

The chai seller replies,
“He didn’t make him anything.
He just didn’t move.”

The rickshaw puller nods.
“That’s worse.”

The note still hangs in the air,
even though it isn’t sounding
anymore.

The constable is gone,
but the lane holds the shape
of his absence
like a dent in metal that
doesn’t spring back.

People start moving again,
but with the faint stiffness
of a crowd pretending it
wasn’t watching something
dangerous.

The guava seller exhales
loudly, as if claiming the air

again.

“Every day worse,” he mutters.

The betel-leaf woman ties
her hair tighter.
“Every day louder.”

“Louder with what?”

“With everything.”

She doesn’t explain.
She doesn’t need to.

A tram bell clangs from the main road,
hard enough to slice through the tension.
The evenness of its rhythm almost feels like relief.

Almost.

Near the far corner of the lane,
a group of students gathers beneath a banyan tree.
Not many — four, maybe five, but enough to draw glances.

Their shirts are crisp in the
heat, hair too neatly combed
for this neighborhood.
They sit on the low wall
passing a newspaper
between them,
fingers tapping headlines,
voices quick and tight.

“This is the day,” one says.
“You said that yesterday.”

“Yesterday wasn’t ready.”

“And today is?”

The first one folds the paper sharply.
“Today no one can pretend they don’t know.”

A few vendors watch them.
Not with hostility —
with caution.
Students bring trouble
without meaning to.
Sometimes without noticing.

One of the boys notices the

stares,
adjusts his tone,
lowers it.

“They say there will be
speeches near the mill gates.”

“Then they’ll send the police.”

“They always send the police.”

Someone spits on the ground.
“Let them come.”

But the bravado rings thin,

like steel stretched too far.

The boys don't stay long.
Students never do.
They move on,
leaving the lane with more
heat than they found.

At the chai stall,
the vendor wipes the counter
again,
though it's already clean.

The rickshaw puller returns
his empty cup.

“What was that upstairs?”

“Practice.”

“That wasn’t practice.
That was something else.”

“Everything you can’t explain
is ‘something else’ to you,”
the vendor says, smirking.

The puller scratches the back
of his neck.
“Well, it made him step back.”

“You think sound can do that?”

“I think whatever’s happening in this city,
it’s happening in places we can’t see.”

The vendor snorts.
“You sound like those boys with the newspapers.”

“Those boys think they’re starting something.”

The vendor leans on the counter.
“They are.
They just don’t know what price they’re paying.”

Before the puller can answer, a woman with a basket approaches.

“Is it true?” she asks the vendor.

“What?”

“That someone is playing music inside that house again.”

The vendor shrugs.
“People play music everywhere.”

“Not like that.”

The vendor doesn’t respond.
He just pours her tea.

She glances at the shuttered building,

as if expecting someone to
materialize and speak.

No one does.

The rickshaw puller steps
away,
but he keeps looking back at
the shuttered window,
as though expecting
movement behind it.

He almost bumps into a
teenage boy
carrying an armful of books.

The boy apologizes
automatically,
books nearly slipping.

“Where are you running?” the
puller asks.

“Library.”

“You read all that?”

“Not yet.”

The puller nods,
unsure why he bothered to

ask.

The boy hesitates.
“You heard it too, right?
Upstairs?”

The puller studies him.
“Why does everyone
suddenly care about a tune?”

The boy looks down at his
books,
fingers tapping their spines.

“Because it wasn’t a tune,” he

says quietly.
“It was a message.”

“A message to who?”

The boy looks away.
“To the ones who can hear.”

He hurries on,
books pressed tight to his
chest.

A breeze lifts dust across the
lane.
It’s barely a breeze —

more a shift in the city's
breathing.

Somewhere, far off,
a drum beats once.
Not music.
A signal.

Someone says,
"That's the second one today."

Someone else answers,
"It'll be more by noon."

Near the wall of posters,

the workers have returned.
This time with more of them.
They stand closer.
Shoulders touching.
Eyes narrow,
faces set.

Something is forming there,
though the shape isn’t clear
yet.

And then —
behind the shutters —
another sound.

Not a full phrase.
Not a melody.

Just two notes.

Close together.
Low.
Heavy.
Deliberate.

A call.

A warning.

A choice.

The chai vendor freezes mid-stir.

The puller stops walking.

The book-carrying boy turns halfway around.

The workers look up in unison, as if summoned.

The constable, farther down the street,
stops mid-step

and looks back.

Everyone hears it.

No one knows what it means.

But the lane feels suddenly smaller,
as though the city has leaned in
to listen to itself.

Rhythm emerging.
Intent unfurling.
People aligning toward a

pressure
they can’t yet name

By the time the constable disappears into the morning glare, the lane has already reshaped what happened into something more dramatic, more intimate, more satisfying to repeat.

“He stepped back.”
“No, the door pushed him.”
“Don’t be stupid — the sound pushed him.”

Here, news spreads
diagonally.
Through steam rising from
kettles.
Through the rhythm of shop
shutters sliding upward.
Through gestures quick
enough to be mistaken for
coincidence.

The day builds around them.

Heat hangs low.
Somewhere beyond the lane,

cloth bales are being slammed onto carts — that particular thump that makes the air smell of turmeric and frayed rope.
The traders there don't need introduction.
You can feel Burrabazar's pulse without anyone naming it.

A tram screeches in the distance, sharp and impatient, the sort of noise that only comes from a road

wide enough for trams to bully their way through but narrow enough that everyone resents it.
People don't say "Harrison Road."
They just wince in its direction.

A rickshaw cuts through the dust, its runner lean, shoulders shining.
His passenger mutters numbers under his breath, already chasing the day's

profits, as if some invisible
office across town might
grade him for punctuality.

At the chai stall —
a wooden plank balanced on
bricks, three clay cups
waiting like tiny disposable
promises —
the vendor stirs tea thick
with cardamom and the faint
bitterness of yesterday's
leaves still clinging to the pot.

"Sweet," the passenger

orders.

The vendor gives him a look.
“Try being sweet yourself.
Cheaper than sugar.”

The man doesn’t smile.
Men counting money rarely
do.

Near a wall layered with
posters and scraps of
yesterday’s declarations,
the jute workers gather in a
loose half-circle.

Even in daylight you can see
the mills on them —
fine dust in their hair, shirts
that never quite shake off the
fatigue of Howrah's morning
siren.
Their clothes say "twelve-
hour shift" before their
mouths do.

One of them touches a line of
ink on the poster,
as if checking whether the
promise it describes is still
warm.

A voice says,
“We should go.”

Another voice replies,
“We always say that.”

A third, quieter:
“If the docks join… it changes things.”

No one says the word “strike.”
They don’t have to.
The city is always one rumor away from stopping.

A gust of wind carries a
different tone —
something leaner, sharper,
dustier.
A sound you can only hear
when young men gather with
newspapers held like
weapons.
College Street is not close,
but its arguments tend to
travel.

“This is the day,” someone
insists in the distance.

“No — this is the warning.”

Their voices ripple into the
lane and vanish.

And above all this —
from behind the shutters that
have remained stubbornly
closed through the morning
—
a sound returns.

Not a wander.
Not a test.
A settling.

First, the soft brushing of
fingers across a tanpura's
strings,
the kind of sweep that tells a
room to straighten its spine.
No accompanist;
just the musician refreshing
the drone by hand,
letting the vibration pool
across the floorboards.

Then the sitar joins —
three notes, precise, rising
into the air with the calm of

someone who has decided
something quietly and
completely.

The chai seller pauses.
He recognizes the shift:
this isn't warming up.
This is intention.

The rickshaw runner stops
mid-step, eyes half closing.
Not devotion, not escape —
just recognition of a note
that lands exactly where his
exhaustion lives.

The jute workers turn their heads slightly upward.
“He means it today,” one murmurs.

The vendor wipes his hands on a rag that once was white.
“He plays like someone who’s no longer practicing.
He’s begun.”

The two notes that follow bend toward each other —
close, heavy, unblinking.

A boy carrying books stops
completely, as if those notes
have jammed the hinge of his
next step.
A woman with a basket of
vegetables adjusts her grip
without looking up.
Even the chai seller forgets to
stir.

Somewhere farther down the
road,
the constable halts without
understanding why.

The sound does not ask to be noticed.
It simply arranges the space around itself.

A second gust drags in the smell of the river — warm, patient, a little rotten, a little holy.
The Hooghly always had timing.

Voices lower.
Breaths shorten.

The lane narrows, not
physically, but perceptually —
as though the city has leaned
in to listen to something only
half meant for it.

Rhythm begins to form.
Not through drums —
through decisions people
haven't realized they're
making.

Calcutta inhales,
waiting for whatever comes
next.

A tram bell cuts across the
air, sharp as a blade edge.
A handcart squeals against
stone.
Street chatter thickens in the
heat like a sauce no one
asked for.

The girl steps out of the lentil
shop with the steel container
pressed to her side.
Her breath tries to shape the
note she practiced earlier,
but she bites down on the

impulse.
The sound stays inside her
chest, tight and restless.

At the corner, the students
keep arguing —
a wild duet of theory and ego.
She slips past them.
One of them glances up,
sensing a shift he can’t define,
as if the street carried a new
tension for half a heartbeat.
By the time he looks properly,
she’s already several steps
away,

face lowered, shoulders steady,
vanishing into the crowd like a hand withdrawn from water.

Upstairs, the sitarist sits perfectly still,
hands resting lightly on the frets, feeling the day tug at him through the cracks in the shutters.

The letter lies at his feet.
No invitation should feel this heavy,

but this one does.

He didn’t come to Calcutta
for salons or praise.
He came because the city
allowed him to arrive without
applause and survive without
explanation.

He lifts the sitar again.
Not to perform.
Not to impress anyone below.
But because the instrument
steadies something inside him
that the city keeps loosening.

He plays a short phrase —
quick, angular, unfinished.
A thought cut in mid-air.

He stops.
Listens.
Not to the city — to the
silence inside the room,
the one he’s been avoiding
since he arrived here.

The next phrase escapes
sharper,
like an argument he’s been

holding in for weeks.

The girl takes the long route home,
hoping the walk will settle her nerves,
but every sound around her feels tuned a little differently today.

Rag-sellers calling out prices.
A bullock cart creaking through narrow lanes.
A stray dog dragging its paws through shade.

Everything feels slightly out of alignment —
as if someone has shifted the city’s pitch without permission.

At the corner near the tailor shop, an older man pauses mid-stitch and watches her pass.
Not with suspicion — with recognition.
He doesn’t know her name.
He doesn’t need to.

Some people carry sound
inside them
even when they walk silently.

The girl quickens her pace.

Back in the lane, the chai
seller shakes out a fresh
batch of leaves into boiling
water.
He glances up at the
shuttered room.

“That man,” he says to no one
in particular,

“plays like he’s trying to make
a decision he already made.”

The rickshaw puller, wiping
sweat from his neck, answers,
“Everyone in this city is trying
to make decisions they made
years ago.”

They share the kind of look
men share
when truth accidentally falls
out of their mouths.

The chai bubbles over.

The puller nudges the pot
away from the flame.

The lane returns to its rhythm,
but something in it has
tightened —
not fear,
not excitement,
just a shift in pressure,
as if the day is waiting for
one more story-thread to fall
into place.

The sun climbs higher,
flattening shadows, pressing

heat into the lane.
People adjust their pace —
not slower, just more
deliberate,
as if the air has thickened
enough to require
negotiation.

The girl turns onto a broader
road where more pedestrians
drift in loose strands.
Hawkers call out prices with
the confidence of men
who've repeated the same
words since boyhood.

Horse carts rattle past.
A tram clanks by, its windows crowded with office clerks in stiff collars.

She pauses at a crossing, waiting for the stream of bodies to open a gap.
Someone to her left says,
“Did you hear? Another meeting near the college this afternoon.”
Another replies,
“Every day is a meeting now.”

A small group of young men
huddle near a tea stall,
their voices low but energetic,
their hands moving in quick
gestures.
She recognizes the tone —
the certainty of people who
believe history is waiting just
around the corner.

She keeps walking.

Her aunt warned her to keep
her eyes down,
but she lifts them briefly

anyway,
because the city is a book she
is not allowed to read
and she can’t help trying to
catch stray sentences.

Upstairs, the sitarist finally
picks up the letter.
The paper crackles softly —
proof that he’s folded and
unfolded it too many times.

He reads it again.
The invitation is simple:
a gathering in a merchant’s

house,
an afternoon of music for
men who prefer their politics
mixed with melody.

A younger version of him
would have refused
immediately.
A version slightly older might
have accepted out of
resignation.

The version sitting here now
is stuck between the two like
a note caught on a wrong fret.

He sets the letter aside.
Stands.
Crosses the room to the
small basin in the corner.
The water inside is dusty
from neglect.
He splashes some onto his
face anyway,
letting the coolness break his
indecision for a moment.

The sitar on the mat seems to
watch him,
as if waiting for him to either

commit or walk away.

He dries his hands.
Sits again.
Touches the neck of the instrument.

Decision hasn't arrived yet, but the shape of it is forming.

The girl returns toward the narrow lane where her home waits.
As she turns the final corner, she slows:

two women are talking near
her door,
heads almost touching,
eyes sharp with curiosity.

One of them glances at the
girl,
then lowers her voice,
but not enough to hide the
tone.

The girl feels a familiar
tightening in her stomach.
Women in this neighborhood
speak in two registers:

warmth or suspicion.
There is no middle.

She steps past them quietly.
One of the women says,
“She leaves early these days.”

The girl doesn’t look back.
She steps into the stairwell
and closes the door behind
her,
heart beating faster than her
footsteps.

Up the stairs.

Into her room.
She sets the steel container down.
Her throat aches — not from singing,
but from stopping herself too abruptly earlier.

She sits on the mat.
Not singing.
Not daring.
Just breathing, steadying herself,
telling her voice to wait for another moment

when the world isn't listening so closely.

Back in the lane, the chai seller lifts his kettle off the flame and says,
"Something's changing today."

The rickshaw puller replies,
"Everything in this city changes every day."

The chai seller shakes his head.
"No. This is different.

Feels like we're all standing
one step away from
something we can't see yet."

A boy passing by with a stack
of books adds,
"That's what my teacher says.
History doesn't knock.
It just enters."

The men stare at him.
He shrugs and hurries off.

Above them, the shutters
stay closed.

But the tension behind them is beginning to shift.